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**‘On the Side of the Angels?’: Ken Loach, *The Angels’ Share*, and the pursuit of new forms of politically-engaged cinema**

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Critical perspectives sympathetic to the work of British filmmaker Ken Loach have tended to emphasise the importance of content over form. John Hill, whose authoritative commentary on Loach provides one of the starting points for this study, has described approaches discounting Loach’s politics in favour of formal analysis as involving ‘a degree of disregard for – and possibly a sense of superiority to – the ideas that have animated Loach’s work for so long’. Certainly Loach himself has expressed continuing exasperation with critics who dwell on the ‘style and technique’ of his films while paying relatively little attention to their ‘subject matter’ (Hill 2011, p. 221). The content-centric approach espoused by Hill resonates strongly with the influence of literary naturalism and Italian neo-realism on Loach’s work, both of which prioritise content-driven approaches and stage direct engagements with socio-historical specificity. Considering this notion of extra-textual address, Millicent Marcus’s insistence that the ‘vast cultural and ideological reverberations’ of neorealism demand ‘an approach that goes far beyond mere considerations of style’ (1987, p. xv) can be seen to reflect John Hill’s assertions that:

[T]he measure of [the success of Loach’s work...] has never been just an aesthetic matter but also a broadly ‘political’ one. This does not [...] refer simply to the political orientation of the films but also to their capacity to ‘provoke’ audiences and critics and, in so doing, to intervene politically within the public sphere (2011, p. 221).

In contrast to Loach’s recent reluctance to discuss questions of form, Graham Fuller’s *Loach on Loach* depicts the filmmaker as a well-travelled cinematic pragmatist. Whilst possessed by a Griersonian unease about the ‘seductions of stylization’ (1998, p. ix), from the 1960s onwards Loach can clearly be seen to investigate the formal possibilities of global screen traditions in search of a cinema capable of carrying political critique and progressive consciousness. This article will

consider the process through which Loach's films have continued to adopt differing formal strategies in staging their political engagements with society, and will focus upon the development of one particular formal strand of Loach's work – a move towards popular comedy - and its intertwined political and aesthetic implications. In particular, the discussion will focus upon how changes in Loach's approaches to form and content have conspired to articulate different 'voicings' of cinematic and political meaning, and how the use of comedy has influenced and inflected his underlying political commentary.

Mapping broader trends in Loach's body of work one notices two distinct tendencies. The first is an increasing distrust of 'showy' technique in favour of increasingly 'classical' and 'invisible' cinematic forms. This finds illustration in Loach's increasing reliance on linear narrative (in contrast to the fragmented lyricism of *Up the Junction* (1965)), eschewing of formal cine-rhetorical devices (such as *Poor Cow's* (1967) title cards and faux-documentary interviews, or *Kes's*(1969) comic book, instruction manual and football scores), an increasing emphasis on performance (rather than camera) driven directorial strategies to give the actors greater space (as in for example *Kes*, see Fuller 1998, p. 41), and in the director's own discursive corrective on the importance of content and centrality of script (Maylum 2012). The second tendency is a growing inclination towards comedy, intertwined with the appearance of a brightening outlook in *Raining Stones* (1993) and *Looking for Eric* (2009). This sense of brightening is intriguing in a filmmaker celebrated for his scathing critiques of capitalist dysfunction and overriding sense of pessimism; Fuller has praised Loach's refusal of the 'placebos and panaceas of happy endings' (1998, p. ix), while Hill, discussing the 'utopian resolutions' of Loach-indebted working class comedies *Brassed Off* (1996) and *The Full Monty* (1997), notes that 'such palliatives are rarely available in Loach's films' (1998, p. 19).

Released in 2012, *The Angels' Share* is perhaps Loach's brightest film yet, and continues the tendency to undermine received notions of what a 'Ken Loach film' might be, perhaps echoing the director's own quoted desire to be 'contradictory' (Loach, Lavery & O'Brien 2012). On the heels of *Carla's Song* (1996), *My Name is Joe* (1998), *Sweet Sixteen* (2002) and *Ae Fond Kiss...* (2004), *The Angels' Share* also marks another instalment of Loach's unofficial Scottish project with screenwriter Paul Lavery. In marked comparison to the angry pessimism of *My Name is Joe* and *Sweet*

*Sixteen*, however, *The Angels' Share* offers a hopeful, upbeat and arguably 'feel good' ending, not entirely dissimilar to that of *The Full Monty*. Juxtaposing the conventions of comedy and caper movie with brutal realism, *The Angels' Share*'s warm welcome at Cannes contrasted starkly with bafflement amongst sections of the press, where it was pronounced 'tonally jarring' (Slater-Williams 2012), 'troubling' (Merry 2013) and 'implausible' (Dalton 2012). Seemingly inconsistent with his 'own rulebook' (Dalton 2012), *The Angels' Share* thus presents something of an enigma when considered alongside Loach's on-going concerns, embodying another intriguing chapter in his exploration of cinematic forms in the service of political engagement.

Considering critical approaches to *The Angels' Share*, one encounters two particular discourses within which to frame an analysis. The first involves situating the film within Loach's wider body of work, and the issues facing cinematic 'voicings' of internationalist left-wing societal critique. Given Loach's more recent predilection for shooting in Scotland and the discursive arena of this publication, however, there is also an inclination to look at *The Angels' Share* alongside Loach and Laverty's other 'Scottish' films, and thus through the more localised lens of Scottish film criticism. To do so too conclusively, however, would be overlook the recurrent tendency (discussed below) in Loach's films to aspire to a degree of generality in chronicling the fortunes of working class 'everymen' in British society, reflecting Laverty's comments that 'no great premium' was placed upon *My Name is Joe*'s Glaswegian location which he argued was no 'less or more complex than any other city' (cited in Hill, 2009, p.90). However, as Hill has asserted, 'films set in Scotland (no matter how "authentic") are never discursively "innocent" but inevitably occupy a position in relation to pre-existing traditions of representation' (2009, p. 91). This article will therefore attempt to consider *The Angels' Share* from both perspectives.

### **Towards a 'Loachian' archetype**

In understanding the apparent anachronism of *The Angels' Share*, it is necessary to first examine the rules it appears to be breaking, and to investigate the DNA of an admittedly unstable 'Loachian' model. If one were to attempt to theorise a soft-edged 'Loachian' archetype, it would undoubtedly share many of the hallmarks of classical

neorealism. Loach himself describes the influence of the Italian post-war neorealists on his own work; saying ‘those classic post-war Italian films just seem to have an immense respect for people. They give people space and they’re concerned with their concerns’ (Fuller 1998, p. 38). The parallels between Loach’s cinema and the canonic image of Italian neorealism are remarkable, stretching from a preoccupation with unheard perspectives, dialect, and authentic representation via non-actors, to location shooting and research-based script development. Given his prioritisation of content it would be misleading, however, to frame Loach’s cinema as a facsimile-like adoption of any pre-existing form. Introducing a discussion of the refracted nature of neorealism as a global movement, Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar have insisted, that ‘nothing moves, is exported, or is accepted wholesale’ and that the global adoption of neorealism has been characterised by ‘some elements [being accepted], others [...] fiercely resisted and still others [...] incorporated into the bricolage’ of new host forms (2011, p. 12). Similarly, I would argue that, rather than being a card-carrying neorealist or naturalist, as Deborah Knight has argued (1997), Loach can most usefully be seen as a formal opportunist, who over the years has adopted a range of strategies in pursuit of a purpose-fit form.

Critics have largely come to regard Italian post-war neorealism as lacking a fully-formed political impulse. Christopher Wagstaff insists that Italian post-war neorealists like ‘Rossellini, De Sica, and Zavattini are neither political ideologues themselves, nor are they conscious mouthpieces’ (2007, p. 62), while Millicent Marcus has described the reluctance of most Italian neorealists ‘to embrace a Marxist perspective’ (1987, p. 27). Elsewhere Paul Willemen, considering politically-engaged filmmaking around the world, seemed to dismiss Italian neorealism as a relatively soft bourgeois form lacking the sufficient radicalism to serve as a firm antecedent to a ‘third cinema’ (Pines & Willemen 1990, p. 4, 22).

Wagstaff’s notion of *sermo humilis* or ‘lowered voices’ (2007, p. 89) reflects a broader concern in Italian neorealism with dialect and cultural specificity to address the false cohesion of grand, ‘universal’ narratives projected by hegemonic institutions. This in turn invokes neorealism’s innate sense of critique and nascent political nature, and its use of cinematic narrative to confront the dysfunction of a decentred society. Vittorio De Sica and Cesare Zavattini’s *Shoeshine* (1946) and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) in particular embody a clear societal address, denouncing contemporary socio-

economic dysfunction in their respective depictions of the destructive effects of unemployment (*Bicycle Thieves*) and institutionalisation (*Shoeshine*) on working class protagonists. What begins as a soft, poetic, humanistic impulse in De Sica and also Rosellini is, however, crystallised into direct political critique in Loach's adoption of neorealist forms, which mount their societal critiques with greater directness and specificity, developing a pre-existent formal tendency in Italian neorealism into a fully-formed, systematised political impulse.

Surveying the political implications of film aesthetics, one encounters a sense of chicken and egg between politically-engaged film criticism and filmmakers prizing an engagement with historical specificity. Marxist and politically-engaged film criticism (such as Colin McArthur's seminal 1982 *Scotch Reels* project) tends to be narrative-centric, extracting the linear code of narrative from the complex film object. Such approaches focus upon the direct, literal implications of film narrative, and the manner in which it engages explicitly with history. Mirroring this politicised conception of film, Loach (as mentioned previously) has insisted on his films being judged primarily on their content, and has seemingly striven to create a cinema prioritising narrative- and content-centrism, harnessing the innate potential of linear narrative fiction as a means of showing consequences, dispensing morals, and invoking a fable-like judgment on the status quo. As Loach's cinema is fully aware, linear narrative's ability to depict causality (and thus suggest the possible/probable repercussions of particular actions in a given time and place) yields a dormant political character, allowing filmmakers opportunities to mount societal critiques and offer what Paul Willemen (via Raymond Williams) has described as 'diagnostic understandings' (Pines & Willemen 1990, p. 4).

Given this didactic potential of narrative, a story's conclusion thus takes on a particular weight, articulating – like final statements in an argument – the overarching meaning or moral underlying a series of depicted events. Wagstaff has demonstrated how the centralism of tragedy and melodrama ('unhappy endings') in neorealist narrative stems from the notion that 'social organisms have ontological primacy, and that the individual exists as a component of an organism,' in opposition to the 'hero-adventure narrative matrix' ('happy endings') whereby 'the individual has ontological primacy, and society *derives* its existence from the primacy of the individual' (2007, p. 61). Whilst Wagstaff claims a broader degree of political abstraction for

neorealism, he relates the ‘hero-adventure’ matrix to Margaret Thatcher’s proposition ‘there is no such thing as society’, and the political theory of Liberalism ‘in which human beings are seen, ontologically as individuals’ (2007, p. 61).

The relative optimism or pessimism of a given narrative can thus be seen to articulate its ‘diagnostic understanding’ of the specific socio-economic circumstance under examination. For Adorno, the classical neorealist model, with its leanings towards melodrama and tragedy, would seem to preserve the possibility of beauty through ugliness, or the possibility of the ‘idyll’ of community through its absence. Happy endings and fairy tale – typically the products of the culture industry – are thus cheap ‘inauthentic’ lies, to be unveiled and torn aside (2004, p. 50). In Brechtian terms, the absence of happy endings denies audiences opportunity to return to a state of complacent apathy via climactic catharsis, whilst elsewhere Deborah Knight discusses how the apparent ‘fatalism’ of Zola’s naturalist model is more accurately viewed as ‘determinism’ (1997, p. 63), a term frequently used by Hill to describe narrative impulse in Loach. Discussing Knight’s analysis, Hill comments that ‘naturalism may be seen to constitute a form of “secularised” melodrama in which the workings of socioeconomic forces are substituted for those of “fate”’ (2009, p. 182). Knight notes that experimental naturalism is predicated on the basis that de-centred societies predetermine the fate of individuals, thus ensuring ‘unhappy endings’ from the outset:

No stage of the experiment can tell us how things would go better for characters if, for example, they had just had the luck, sense, or prudence to act differently partly through the course of events that we witness. Rather, for novelist and reader – and for filmmaker and viewer – we must come to see how the whole complex course of events is all but guaranteed by the initial conditions themselves. (1997, p. 63).

Found at the locus of a series of powerful strains of modernist thought, the social-determinist tragic/melodramatic ‘unhappy ending’ can thus be seen to have a powerful gravity: a cultural weight that provides neorealism/naturalism with a narrative archetype to which the large part of Loach’s work can be seen to adhere.

### *The Angels' Share in Context*

Seen within this context, one of the most remarkable things about *The Angels' Share* is its sense of optimism; the manner in which the film creates a sense of crippling social pressure embodying all the 'inbuilt narrative pessimism' Hill has identified in Loach's previous Scottish films (2009, p. 100), before fashioning its protagonist a fantastical escape route that draws upon Ealing comedies and *Ocean's Eleven*-style heist thrillers.

Robbie (Paul Brannigan) is a new father first seen being sentenced to a programme of community service. The birth of Robbie's son instigates a desire to escape his violent past and forge a new life for his family, recalling Liam's utopian hopes for a new life with his mother in *Sweet Sixteen* and Joe's hopes of romance with middle-class social worker Sarah and desire to help young couple Liam and Sabine forge a stable life in *My Name is Joe*. If considered as an informal trilogy, there is notable consistency in the manner each film sets up a desire for change among working-class men in and around Glasgow, before creating an opposing sense of crippling social gravity via dysfunctional social systems, crime and gang culture, and an overriding lack of choice and opportunity. Paul Laverty has remarked that 'you could tell a tragic story with the same character, Robbie, very, very easily and we did that with *My Name Is Joe* and *Sweet Sixteen*' (Carnevale, 2013). The neorealist/naturalist narrative paradigm could thus be seen to dramatise the very lack of social agency inherent within experimental naturalism: the apparent possibility of change and a better life is dangled (its fulfilment reliant upon a sufficient degree of social agency) before being crushed by the underlying determinism of a dysfunctional society.

The first half of *The Angels' Share* is both the most familiar in standard 'Loachian' terms, and the most cohesive in its dramaturgy. Considering the film's performative 'authenticity,' the scene in which Robbie confronts Anthony, a victim of his previous violent crimes (now partially blinded) displays the greatest coherence with the neorealist aims of *sermo humilis* and dialect, opening up a relatively unheard perspective in cinema, to create a powerful identification with a character other filmmakers would caricature as a two-dimensional thug. Evoking Colin McArthur's discussion of Glasgow as 'city of dreadful night' (1991, p. 71), the sequence is vividly



rendered through flashback, placing the audience in the perspective of the victim and thus providing for the first and only time in the film an exteriorised, othering perspective on Robbie. The camera starts in the car with Anthony, whilst we hear his voice in the present, recounting his experience in the TASC (Talk After Serious Crime) session. We therefore encounter Robbie as Anthony does, as a young man capable of terrifying violence at the slightest provocation. In terms of cinematic construction, the sequence is perhaps the most complex in the whole film, intercutting between two different temporal strands to give the audience (and all the characters present at the TASC session, including Robbie himself) a complex picture of the two sides of Robbie, between the appalling violence of his attack on Anthony and his own horror and despair when confronted by what he has done.

In the following scene Robbie addresses his violent past with girlfriend Leonie, promising his newborn son 'I swear on your life and on mine that I'll never hit another person, as long as I live'. The scene acts as a statement of Robbie's 'Loachian' dilemma; on one hand he has the promise of new life, as epitomised by Leonie, Luke, the community service program and his friendship with Big Harry (John Henshaw), and on the other his own quick temper and capacity for violence, his feuds with longstanding rival Clancy and Leonie's disapproving and aggressive family, and his lack of a livelihood, home and supportive family of his own (when asked if Luke is named after his own father, Robbie remarks darkly 'no way, no chance'). In terms of the naturalist model, these are the 'conditions' to be explored and the fact that they are spelt out so clearly *and* retained as discursive imperatives throughout the film with Big Harry and Leonie acting as spokespersons for the former and Leonie's father for the latter belies the film's roots in 'scientific experiment' narrative. Scientific experiment narrative is a device Loach and Laverty inherit from literary experimental naturalism (although it is a notion which finds equal consonance with Italian neorealism), whereby (as discussed above by Knight) narrative is explicitly conceived to explore what *would* happen in a given scenario, under particular socio-economic conditions.

Aside from its opening sequence, which draws heavily on farce, the first third of the film displays the strong neorealist/naturalist tendencies we would expect from a conventional Loach film; there is the almost documentary feel of the vignettes introducing Robbie and his peers (which have a vague echo of the reflexive faux-

documentary techniques Loach flirted with in *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and *Poor Cow*), the inescapable threat of violence, and initial dealings with the forbidding institutions of the state. In a more conventional Loach film, following the precepts of neorealism/naturalism, Robbie's promise to Luke that he will renounce violence like Joe's sobriety, Liam's hopes of a new home, Giuseppe and Pasquale's horse in *Shoeshine*, and Antonio's livelihood and dignity in the *Bicycle Thieves* – would come under increasing and 'inevitable' pressure from the promise scene onwards, leading to a tragic ending in which the hope of a new start with Leonie and Luke is destroyed by his own lack of agency and the violence of his past life.

The scene where Robbie makes his promise to Luke and receives an ultimatum from Leonie is one of two key schism moments in *The Angels' Share*, and it is telling that the film subsequently modulates in a completely different direction. After the cut to black (very literally demarcating the film's neorealist/naturalist first act from the lighter material to follow), the next image is what appears to be the Highlands, over an energetic soft-rock music cue telling the audience to expect a new sense of excitement, energy and humour. The film's answer to Robbie's dilemma is to imagine a fantastical whisky distillery heist, allowing Robbie both a sense of accomplishment and the funds to escape his situation and provide a new life for his family. There is thus an interesting dissonance between the 'authentic,' realist statement of the 'Loachian' social dilemma and the film's comparatively fantastical conclusion seeming to contradict the underlying principles of neorealism and naturalism.

Much of *The Angels' Share's* lighter material seems to stem from the mythic centrality of whisky, recalling Colin McArthur's warnings about whisky and tourism embodying 'the two key sites of regressive discourse about Scotland' (2009, p. 42). The film invokes a litany of recurrent images of Scotland, and in particular those associated with tourism: whisky and whisky distillery tours, kilts, sporrans, Edinburgh castle, the highlands (and tourists in the highlands), Irn Bru, characters called Hamish and Mairi and The Proclaimers' ubiquitous *500 Miles*, which plays prominently in the film twice, once to introduce narrative movement to the Highlands, proudly underscoring a 'rousing' image of the film's young protagonists in kilts, striding over the brow of a lush, forested glen, and the second over the end credits. A cartoon of Scottish stereotypes could scarcely be more cohesive. On paper therefore, it would very much seem *The Angels' Share* has succumbed to the 'tartan monster' (McArthur,

2003 p. 113) so reviled by the *Scotch Reels* project and famously first so named by Tom Nairn in *The Break-up of Britain* (1977).

Closer analysis reveals a more complex engagement with what McArthur would describe as the ‘Scottish Discursive Unconscious’. This he defines as the ‘unconscious discourse relating to ethnicity’ that mediates representations of Scotland, and thus an underlying body of assumptions and misconceptions that unwittingly haunt images of Scotland constructed without a sufficient degree of critical reflection. (2002, p. 8). Many of the ‘tartan’ tropes *The Angels’ Share* employs can be seen to be decentred by a sense of class dispossession and epistemic exteriority. The kilts are suggested by Albert as a disguise, to mask a sense of class illegitimacy and help the group blend into the Highlands; Rhino exclaims bitterly that ‘we might as well have “criminals on community service” tattooed on our foreheads. I mean, we’re all wearing trackies, we look like Neds, right, and if we put on a suit, it just looks like we’re going to court’. The kilt thus has a relatively complex significance within the film, acting as a conscious mask to an underlying class discourse, and thus a layer of self-reflexive inauthenticity. When asked by tourists at a picturesque Highland viewpoint if he is ‘from the Highlands’, Rhino replies ‘actually my great, great grandfather, he was highland chief. This kilt is the tartan and I wear it with pride every time I put it on’, thus lampooning tourist stereotypes of tartan and tradition. This sequence has strong echoes of the scene in *My Name is Joe* where Joe stands at a similar highland viewpoint, watching from a distance as Japanese tourists take photographs of a tartan-clad piper. Joe gently ridicules the piper with the woman working at the viewpoint’s tea-van, again creating a sense of Loach and Laverty’s Scottish working-class characters as distanced from the spectacle of tourism. Returning to *The Angels’ Share*, the same sense of exteriority and dispossession is also present in Albert’s stubborn insistence he has never seen or heard of Edinburgh castle. As a tourist landmark, significant of the ‘more bourgeois’ city culture of Edinburgh, it is – like kilts, the Highlands and expensive whisky – far removed from the reality of Albert’s life. As such this can perhaps be read as a surreal comment from Laverty on the distance between working-class young men in Glasgow and the lofty, ‘unreachable’ landmarks of Scotland’s feudal history.

Such reflexive employment of ‘tartan’ tropes perhaps makes a small case for ‘ludic Modernism’ in *The Angels’ Share*, as identified by Colin McArthur in Murray

Grigor's reflexive 'send-ups' of the tourist gaze (2009). It certainly signals a degree of awareness about representations of Scotland that seems likely to come more from Laverty than Loach, and indeed there is something very interesting about the way the film draws parallels between the exterior gaze of tourists, and the similarly exterior gaze of its disenfranchised young people, who themselves are also relative outsiders when it comes to distillery tours and Edinburgh castle.

However, not everything the film purloins from the lexicon of the 'Scottish Discursive Unconscious' is deployed quite so reflexively. It is difficult to know, for example, how much irony is inherent in the use of The Proclaimers' *500 Miles*. Ironic or self-reflexive use of music is highly uncharacteristic of Loach's films, and indeed *The Angels' Share*'s markedly unselfconscious and dated soft-rock soundtrack (which in its own way forces a certain epistemic imposition on the characters in a manner not entirely dissimilar to the anachronistic scoring Colin McArthur has discussed in *Whisky Galore!*, 2002, p. 35) is so similar to *500 Miles*, that the song's appearance has no real sense of a change of register. Similarly, the closing moments of the film, where the song reappears to coincide with Robbie's cheeky wink when Leonie tells him 'you're a scamp Robbie Emmerson, from the first day I saw ye', do not signal any self-consciousness, and indeed have an unwelcome whiff of 'kailyard keech' (Lochhead, 2001) in their Rob Roy-esque dialogue and direct association between *500 Miles* and Robbie's 'scallywagging'.

A sense of invoking certain regressive discourses while partially inflecting them, also haunts the film's employment of its central 'tartan' image; whisky. Discussing *Whisky Galore!* (1954), Gavin Wallace has noted how the novel is 'repeatedly cited as a reach-me-down metaphor for that most enduring of Scottish myths – whisky – a novel which answers perfectly those who would associate whisky and its mystical liturgy with some innate truth about the Scottish psyche' (cited in McArthur 2002, p. 16). *The Angels' Share* similarly seems to draw mystical and metaphorical significance from whisky and its association with 'commonality', recalling Colin McArthur's identification of 'community and sociability' as one of the 'three great myths about whisky' (2002, p. 47). In what will doubtless provide a red flag for *Scotch Reels* loyalists, the film takes a literal, real-time tour round a whisky distillery (led by blonde, tartan-skirted Mairi), in a sequence notable for its relative lack of inflection. For all intents and purposes the sequence is a blandly shot, literal

cinematic distillery tour functioning as straightforward immersion scene: Robbie at first walks quietly behind the group, but by the end of the tour – as he listens to Mairi’s story of the titular 2% which ‘just disappears and evaporates into thin air, gone forever’ – he has fallen under the spell of the whisky myth, as signalled by closer shots and soft guitar underscoring. This same guitar underscoring recurs at several key junctures at the film to underline and sentimentalise the mythic status of whisky; it is present when Robbie is given his first dram from Big Harry to celebrate the birth of his son, plays during the aforementioned distillery ‘revelation’ for Robbie, is heard twice during the Edinburgh whisky tasting session, and plays finally at the end of the film when Big Harry discovers his gift from Robbie. Granted, the distillery sequence is inflected by two moments of what is ostensibly class tension between the bourgeois milieu of the distillery and the community service group, when Willy (Scott Dymond) tries to light up a cigarette near the mash tun and Mo (Jasmin Riggins) steals miniatures from the gift shop, thus threatening to bring the two worlds into tension. However, it is in the film’s interest to sustain the mythic ‘community’ ethos of whisky, and thus the proper, personality-less Mairi engages the group unproblematically throughout, laughing gamely along with the group at Albert’s non-sequiturs that ‘the sexual behaviour of mice is driven by what they sniff’. Here whisky is literally an agent of community, acting as a unifier, holding the group together across class divides.

It would be unfair, however, to claim the film’s employment of whisky is cohesively regressive, and as a symbol it is once again inflected with Loach and Laverty’s heightened sense of class tension and capitalist injustice. The film largely portrays the institution, or institutions, of whisky as an exclusive middle/upper-class arena, from the bourgeois tasting session in Edinburgh (riffing on the standard trope of Edinburgh as Glasgow’s elitist, more bourgeois and ‘less authentic’ neighbour), the stuffy, tartan-bedecked ‘Master of the Quaich’, the pompous, managerial, suited types that Robbie dupes at the distillery, and the rich, baseball-capped American who eventually wins the malt mill. Indeed, the film allows a glimpse (eavesdropping on a late night conversation between upper-class whisky merchant Thaddeus and distillery manager Hamish) of how nepotism and backroom channels can create possibilities of access impossible ‘within the system’, and certainly impossible to those without even the means to participate. Thus one can see Robbie’s theft of the whisky as a re-

appropriation – a cutting across the mechanisms of capitalist wealth to reach a ‘just’ balance – thus allowing the angels their share. The film’s title itself denotes ‘a just sharing’, metaphorically describing *The Angels’ Share*’s strategy as a whole: just as the film allows Robbie and his compadres ‘their share’ of a highly coveted whisky (which the film imbues with the values of community and sociability), so the film (echoing Wagstaff’s notion of neorealist *sermo humilis*) allows them their ‘share’ of cinematic spotlight and screen time, just as elusive and expensive an elixir.

Ultimately the case as to whether *The Angels’ Share* engages progressively with the ‘Scottish Discursive Unconscious’ seems inconclusive. The film certainly injects many of its adopted tartan tropes with a degree of reflexivity, so that they function critically within the film’s progressive class discourse, drawing interesting parallels between the outsider status of tourists, and Robbie’s disenfranchised peers. However, *The Angels’ Share* fails to sustain this approach uniformly, and thus some of its ‘Scotch kitsch’ – the prominent use of *500 Miles*, the inter-textual winks at Ealing, and the heavy handed use of whisky as a metaphor for ineffable communal value – retain a regressive sense of playing up to homegrown myths and the exterior preconceptions of tourist culture. Arguably, it would seem ultimately that the film is unable to completely outrun its own questionable employment of a remarkably long list of tartan tropes.

There is perhaps a certain dissonance here between the intentional auteurist discourse this article has largely adopted and the more complex process of *The Angels’ Share*’s construction, and one would speculate again that the film’s engagement with representations of Scotland is probably attributable more to Laverty’s script rather than Loach’s direction. However, these questions pertain regardless to the film’s credentials as progressive cinema and the ‘diagnostic understanding’ articulated by its specific geographic and temporal engagement with Scotland, and thus provide an important contribution to a discussion of how form and content conspire in *The Angels’ Share* to create a particular cinematic instantiation of Loach’s broader political concerns.

*Scotch Reels* also provides a lens through which to critique the film’s narrative leanings and its upbeat ending, whereby Robbie and his intrepid team of wily ‘authentic’ outwit capitalists and upper-class eccentrics, thus recalling Colin McArthur’s oft-quoted dismissal of the ‘ahistorical’ nature of Ealing comedies like

*The Maggie* (1954):

In true Kailyard style, what is not achievable at the level of political struggle is attainable in the delirious Scots imagination [...] With a nod, a wink and a dram the Scots once more triumph at the level of the imagination while in the real world their country gets pulled out from under them (1982, p. 49).

Whilst nuancing this critique twenty years later to allow that popular cinemas constructed by ‘deplorable ideologies’ may still yield pleasure and interest, McArthur underlined his earlier comments stating that ‘a glance at the history of modern (particularly Highland) Scotland will indicate the gulf between what Scots are imagined to do, the autonomy over their own country they are posited to wield, in films such as *Whisky Galore!*, *The Maggie* and *Local Hero* (1983), and what actually happens in the “real” world of politics and economics’ (2002, p. 99). Whilst *The Angels’ Share* cannot be accused of papering ‘over the cracks in society to mask [...] contradictions’ to the same extent, the film does seem to play explicitly as an trope upon Ealing comedies like *The Maggie* and *Whisky Galore!*, thus drawing directly (whether consciously or unconsciously) from what *Scotch Reels* and wider Marxist film criticism would consider regressive and ahistorical strands of popular cinema. Indeed, McArthur’s criticisms seem related to Hill’s problematisation of the empty ‘utopian’ endings of *Brassed Off* and the *Full Monty*, and it is perhaps significant that *The Angels’ Share* was dubbed ‘Scotland’s Answer to the *Full Monty*’, a title subsequently worn by the film as the leading slogan on its promotional material. Setting aside then questions of cultural representation to focus on the broader political implications of narrative, the film’s credentials as progressive cinema might seem spurious. Attempting to reconcile the film with his wider body of work, one is left with the question why – given his prizing of politically-coded narrative – might Loach choose in 2012 to break formula with the tried-and-tested naturalist/neorealist paradigm underlying his previous ‘Scottish’ films *My Name is Joe* and *Sweet Sixteen* with *The Angels’ Share*?

**Wider Problems Underlying ‘Happy Endings’ in Loach’s Work**

Discussing audience expectations of ‘unhappy endings’ in the Loach/Laverty project, Paul Laverty described how ‘somebody told me last night they were waiting for the van [in which Robbie escapes] to explode!’ (Turner 2012). This serves as wry illustration of the competing registers at play in *The Angels’ Share* and perhaps of a wider sense of unease concerning the place of ‘happy endings’ within the neorealist/naturalist framework of Loach’s work. Hill has noted how the Greater Manchester-set *Looking for Eric*’s triumphant assertion of community ‘appears to disprove’ his earlier opposition of ‘Loachian’ integrity to the utopian endings of *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off*. Describing *Looking for Eric* as a ‘fantasy of collectivism,’ Hill criticises how ‘the humiliation of a low-grade thug appears to be something of a diversion from the main social and economic issues confronting the characters’ (2011, p. 199). Elsewhere, *Raining Stones*’ similarly Greater Manchester-set ‘Loachian’ dilemma is overcome through an uneasy mix of *deus ex machina* and near-manslaughter. Confronting brutal loan-shark Tansey, to whom he owes an insurmountable debt, Bob triumphs to the extent that Tansey, attempting to flee, crashes his car and is killed. Rather than preserving the problematic implications of Bob’s admittedly very sympathetic attempts to overcome the problems in his life, Loach and writer Jim Allen swiftly absolve him through the moral pronouncements of a Catholic priest, although the caricaturing of Tansey as a two-dimensional monster means little absolution is required. This is followed by a ‘happy ending’ in which Bob is able to pay for his daughter’s communion and regains his stolen van, which appears in a manner (given its proximity to the judgment of the priest, and the cathedral-set communion) that has a strange sense of divine intervention.

Perhaps aware of problematic implications underlying Bob’s absolution, Loach has argued for the particularity and ‘one-off’ nature of the priest’s comments, or as Hill described, ‘a distinction between the church as an institution and the actions of an individual parish priest’ (2011, p. 180). This serves to highlight a broader issue underscoring the dissonance of ‘happy endings’ in Loach’s work, arising from competing registers of particularity and generality. Hill has surveyed the appearances of ‘every-men’ in Loach’s work, describing how it has been ‘a recurring characteristic of Loach’s work that it involves the telling of stories about the lived experience of particular individuals and their families that, nonetheless, aspire to a degree of



‘typicality’ and or social representativeness’ (2011, p. 219). Whilst Loach’s work broadly aspires towards a generalising, fable-like tone in depicting *what generally happens* to working-class ‘every-men’, he occasionally attempts to modulate register within a given film to denote a particularity of incidence. The priest’s absolution in *Raining Stones* is not *what generally happens* to someone in Bob’s position; it is a singular stroke of chance. The same can be said of *The Angels’ Share*. Loach has expressed understandable scorn at the ‘foolish people’ who suggested the film implies ‘you can solve [Robbie’s] problems with crime’ (Ross, 2012). This dissonance between intentionality and misinterpretation does, however, highlight the confusion facing readings of the film’s conflicting registers: where Robbie’s initial situation is seen as ‘general’, ‘real’, and evocative of the dire situations facing thousands of young people in the UK, his ‘escape’ via the whisky heist is seen as a ‘particular’, ‘one-off’, ‘unrepresentative,’ and even ‘mythic’ event.

Whilst discursive examination can thus identify the representative claims of particular events, I would argue that the aesthetic experience of narrative by audiences should not be underestimated; in particular how the classical, teleological ‘social-experiment’-style narratives increasingly adopted by Loach force events claiming differing representational registers into a seemingly causal relationship. *My Name is Joe* and *Sweet Sixteen* both adopt a classical sense of causal narrative determinism through tragic conclusions which imply that Joe and Liam’s inability to achieve ‘happy endings’ is predetermined by their initial socio-economic conditions and resulting lack of social agency; as Joe says himself, ‘every fuckin’ choice stinks’. Recalling Knight’s discussion of the almost scientific character of naturalist narrative, we can perhaps better understand how *The Angels’ Share* could be seen aesthetically to provide ‘a solution’ to Robbie’s dilemma through its narrative rhetoric. It sets up Robbie’s dilemma with all the same deterministically-weighted, narrative pessimism of Joe and Liam’s, yet allows him through its conclusion a ‘mythical’ reprieve from the same sense of ‘scientific’ causality that crushed his Loachian forebears. In this context, Colin McArthur’s comments about *The Maggie* could be seen as dissatisfaction with the ‘solution-potential’ of the film’s ‘answer’ to the problem of capitalist encroachment upon rural communities. This notion of the limitations of classical narrative leads one to question whether linear causality is the most suitable vehicle for Loach’s more optimistic and ‘celebratory’ work, a point that will be

returned to later.

### **In Loach's Defence – Comedy and Popular Engagement**

One defence of *The Angels' Share's* conflict of registers (employed by Loach himself) involves invoking a classical sense of comic genre, and the different narrative and ontological weightings which that might allow for. Echoing the original moment of Italian neorealism, Loach's cinema has consistently shown a tendency to incorporate popular forms of comedy and melodrama (Hill 2011, p. 181), at times taking actors directly from music hall traditions such as Venn Tracey and Sean Glenn in *The Navigators* (for a wider discussion see Fuller 1998, p. 20 and Hill 2011, pp. 120, 170, 181). Roberto Rossellini described the birth of neorealism as the appearance onscreen of music hall personalities such as Aldo Fabrizi and Anna Magnani who brought with them the forms and dialect of indigenous popular entertainment:

Who can deny that it is these actors who first embodied neorealism? That the music-hall scenes of the 'strong men' or of 'Roman ditties' performed on a carpet or with the help of just one guitar, as they were invented by Magnani, or the figure portrayed on local stages by Fabrizi, already anticipated at times certain films of the neorealist period? Neorealism is given birth, unconsciously, by the film in dialect. (cited in Wagstaff 2007, p. 93)

These words have resonance in Loach's work (Jacob Leigh draws a detailed comparison between the use of comedy in *Raining Stones* and De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* in Leigh 2002, p. 143), and indeed Hill has remarked that Loach's films might be said to belong more to the "music-hall" than literary traditions of comedy, relying upon entertainers rather than skilled actors and comic interludes rather than a clearly structured comic narrative' (2011, p. 181). Whilst a vein of populist comedy has always been present in Loach's work, it can be seen to play a greater defining force in establishing genre and narrative expectation from *Riff Raff* (1991) onwards. On a broader level, comedy can also perhaps be seen as one of the main forces underlying the apparent 'brightening' in Loach's work, and might also point to an associated desire for greater engagement with popular audiences.

Loach has at times criticised the stuffy reliance of genre in film criticism as restricting a freer frame of reference, and (recalling his attempt to establish a discursive corrective) an engagement with specific content:

Film critics tend to not just see a film for what it is; like it's just a story. Much more than novels, films have to be categorised by genres – and I don't think filmmakers think that way at all. Certainly we respond to the raw material, to the people, not other film references (Maylum 2012).

Contradicting this dismissal of genre-centric approaches to filmmaking, however, the press surrounding *The Angels' Share* provides a clear sense that Loach's work is mediated by conscious choices about genre, and hard-edged structural rules. Looking through Loach's own discussion of the film, one can assemble a clear typology of related but contrasting models of 'tragedy' and 'comedy': tragedy is defined by a preponderance of serious, 'real' elements with an unhappy ending, whilst comedy possesses a greater weighting towards comic and 'unreal' events, with a happy ending. Loach has described how the 'definition of comedy means that that there must be a happy ending as well as making you smile' (Solis 2013), and elsewhere that 'they say comedy is just tragedy with a happy ending' (Walsh 2012). Consistent with this typology it is significant that 'happy endings' are found in the films that Loach explicitly identified as comedies such as *Raining Stones*, which he identifies as 'comedy [with] a sharp edge', (Fuller 1998, p. 91) and those with a greater preponderance of comic, or unrealistic events like *Looking for Eric* (who's tagline reads 'a heroic comedy from Ken Loach') and *The Angels' Share*. Some films Loach sees as traversing between the two: '[with *My Name is Joe*] we gradually realized that we wanted to make a film that began as a comedy, and ended as a tragedy, because the reality wasn't funny at all' (Hill 2011, p. 182).

In this light, it is interesting to consider the manner in which *The Angels' Share* gives Robbie 'more ways out' than most Loachian protagonists. Robbie is given another chance by the court and is sentenced to community service rather than a prison sentence by a judge who proclaims he is 'obviously a young man of energy and talent'. Through Big Harry, Robbie experiences a much more optimistic rendering of British social services than Loach's protagonists have conventionally encountered in

*Cathy Come Home*, *Ladybird*, *Ladybird* (1994), and even *My Name is Joe*. Not only does Big Harry (who admittedly is depicted as a maverick, breaking institutional guidelines and going far beyond the call of duty) show Robbie support and generosity, he stops him attempting to commit a further act of violence against Leonie's uncles after he is attacked in hospital. In *Leonie*, Robbie has a partner whose support is unerring and whose more middle-class aunt offers Robbie her plush flat as temporary accommodation, saying that 'someone gave me a chance once and it changed my life, and it sure sounds like you two could do with some luck'. *The Angels' Share* could thus be said to be prefiguring Robbie with chances that Liam in *Sweet Sixteen*, with only his sister and the equally hapless Pinball to look to for support, does not have. Perhaps, one can therefore see Laverty and Loach patterning the film from the outset towards a greater lightness to befit its role as comedy.

Loach's deliberate move towards comedy and 'brighter' conclusions are interesting when considered alongside criticisms of the 'bleakness' and pessimism of *My Name is Joe* and *Sweet Sixteen*. The brutal critique voiced in Loach's earlier Scottish films came under fire from both participants and critics, suggesting perhaps that the naturalist/neorealist tragic archetype is not as evergreen as has been here suggested. *My Name is Joe*'s lead actor Peter Mullan, despite huge admiration for Loach's work, described Liam's suicide at the close of the film as 'absurd', achieving 'nothing except moving an audience to tears', whilst offering 'no insight into other options he might have taken' (Hill 2009, p. 98).

As mentioned previously, there is a recurring emphasis in Loach's discussion of *The Angels' Share* that he wanted to out-step what was expected of him, choosing to make a comedy:

[J]ust to be contradictory really. You always want to take an unexpected path. We'd done a film like *Sweet Sixteen*, which was about lads, younger than these, but placed in an equally impossible situation, and that did end in tragedy. But the same characters will have incidents in their lives which are sometimes comic, and other times not. So we just thought we would pick one of the comic moments (Loach et al 2012).

Whilst Loach makes no explicit mention of previous criticism, there is the clear sense

he and Laverty knew they were returning to similar geographic and thematic territory as *Sweet Sixteen* and *My Name is Joe* (see producer Rebecca O'Brien's comments in Loach et al 2012), and wanted to tell the story differently this time and thus – whether consciously or not - address criticisms of their previous work.

In this move towards comedy and ‘unpredictability’ one can also perhaps identify an increasing desire to engage with popular audiences: to undermine Loach’s own image as Scotland’s ‘visiting professor of doom’ (Hill 2009, p. 99), and address discomfort with his growing reputation as the ‘UK’s pre-eminent art-house director’ (Hill 2011, p. 168). Hill has described how ‘Loach has sought to avoid “showy” techniques and has vigorously denied that he makes “elitist or arty” films’ and how ‘Loach’s film-making has become increasingly orthodox in character, pursuing a greater degree of rapprochement with both popular generic forms (such as comedy) and “classical” techniques than was previously the case’ (2011, p. 169).

Perhaps *The Angels’ Share* can then be better understood as a genuine attempt to engage with popular audiences, and to find a form of cinema capable of confronting the issues facing working-class communities in Scotland, while maintaining a sense of optimism, resilience and the possibility of change. Considering the popular success in Scotland of Peter Mullan’s *NEDS* (2010) the previous year, *The Angels’ Share* might thus represent an attempt to bring Loach’s films ‘home’ to the people they aspire to represent, rather than the European art-house audiences and Cannes critics with whom they have found such popularity. One could also speculate about a certain dissatisfaction with the tragic neorealist/naturalist archetype that underscores Loach’s broader ‘brightening’ towards comedy and popular forms; a pragmatic sense that representations of tragic consequences risk pushing already disillusioned popular audiences further into apathy and alienation. Discussing *Looking for Eric* in 2007, Loach described the need to address public pessimism; that ‘audiences are much less optimistic, much less prepared to engage in the possibility of change’ and that ‘you have to work harder to get that [change] in their minds’ (Hill 2011, p. 199). Hill observes that whilst the ‘utopian’ celebration of collective values in *Looking for Eric* may stand at odds with Loach’s normal ‘realism’, the film can ‘speak, nonetheless, to audience’s desires for forms of social connection and mutuality possibly missing in their own lives’ (2011, p. 199).

Considering *The Angels Share*’s apparent corruption of the neorealist/naturalist

paradigm, Loach's comments above suggest that *My Name is Joe* and *Sweet Sixteen* demonstrated not only to critics, but also to Loach and Lavery that the neorealist/naturalist model was somehow insufficient; as a vehicle for advancing political consciousness it did not contain or inspire the possibility of change. Perhaps Loach's 'brightening' can also then be explained as part of an on-going dialogue about the function that politically-engaged filmmaking could or should perform on a moment-to-moment, case-by-case basis; and even a sense that – in adapting to address the disillusioned audiences of 'capitalist realism' – a new formal model is needed.

### **The 'Mythic' Rejoinder of *Miracle in Milan***

Global neorealism has not been without mythic rejoinders to its core template of fatalistic determinism. De Sica and Zavattini followed *Shoeshine* and *Bicycle Thieves* – socially-engaged tragedies about the consequences of poverty – with the mythic *Miracle of Milan* (1950), a surreal fable-like account of a Christ-like ingénue who becomes the saviour of a homeless, disenfranchised community. The film's political position was fiercely debated by contemporary commentators, who dubbed the film simultaneously as 'apolitical', 'communist propaganda' and 'revolutionary in its own way' (Iannone 2012, p. 4). Here one recalls Cairns Craig's discussion of Marxian and Nietzschean conceptions of myth and the changing imperatives for one or other; the Marxian conception of myth is of 'something to be unveiled, torn aside so that the real can stand forth and be recognised for what it is', whereas for Nietzsche, 'the need is to recover the mythic identity that makes action possible [...] we need to attach the broken particularity of our existence to some myth that will return to us the sense of the universal significance of our actions' (1996, p. 219). *Miracle in Milan*, conceived at the locus of the original neorealist movement, inspires speculation as to whether there is more than one way to engage with capitalist dysfunction, and whether the severity and pessimism of neorealist/naturalist tragedy might require a 'maternal', mythic rejoinder. John Hill has speculated as to whether *Looking for Eric* was indicative of Loach adapting to a climate of 'capitalist realism', or – quoting Mark Fisher – 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it' (Hill 2011, p. 201). Recalling Loach's discussion of engaging with

‘less optimistic audiences’, one can perhaps speculate as to whether Loach and Laverty therefore felt a temporal imperative to appeal to the reconstructive power of myth with *Looking for Eric* and *The Angels’ Share*.

Recalling the place of myth in *Scotch Reels*, it is easy to see why such suggestions might sit uneasily within a broader program of Marxist-driven film discourse, driven by a desire to engage directly with history; to ‘reveal’, ‘unveil’ and ‘uncover’ and as such innately uncomfortable with the indirect, the poetic, and other types of ‘submerged’ meaning. Scottish film discourse has, within itself, inflected the ascetic political critique and ‘uncompromising condemnation’ of *Scotch Reels* through the work of scholars such as Duncan Petrie, choosing to take a more measured approach ‘towards questions of inclusiveness, popularity, pleasure and the complex negotiation of cultural meaning’ (2000, p.8). In his authoritative survey of Scottish screen discourse, Petrie challenged the rejection of myth in *Scotch Reels* through a quotation from Adrienne Scullion, voicing a move to reclaim aspects of the mythic as possessing value beyond their denunciation in *Scotch Reels* as cultural kitsch; ‘the role of mythology, legend and fable, the Gothic, the supernatural and the unconscious within the development of the Scottish imagination is not a symptom of psychosis but a sophisticated engagement with the fantastic that other cultures might celebrate as magical realism’ (2000, p. 8).

It is worth noting, however, that *The Angels’ Share*’s deployment of the mythic is not perhaps as internally cohesive as *Miracle in Milan*’s. In similarly ‘answering’ the bleak societal critiques of *Shoeshine* and *Bicycle Thieves* with a mythic sense of hope (just as *The Angels’ Share* seems to ‘answer’ *My Name is Joe* and *Sweet Sixteen*), De Sica and Zavattini break early on with straightforward depictions of reality to encompass explicit aspects of absurdism, surrealism and the mythic-poetic. In terms of form and content, the film is thus reflexively consonant with its own mythic qualities and claims neither a sense of ‘science’ or ‘solution’, choosing to refer obliquely to ‘reality’ rather than address it directly. Conversely, *The Angels’ Share*, in not fully relinquishing its ‘scientific’ neorealist/naturalist roots, projects at times a problematic, over-rhetoricised sense of ‘question’ and ‘answer’, ‘problem’ and ‘solution’. Recalling Loach’s frustration with the ‘foolish people’ who claimed the film presented crime as a solution to Robbie’s problems, one can nonetheless see such readings arising aesthetically from the film’s conflicting registers and reliance upon

classical, teleological narrative; a form which aptly suits the function of neorealist fable or ‘scientific’ naturalist experiment in illustrating pre-determined causality and the inevitable consequence of capitalist dysfunction (as in Loach’s earlier ‘Scottish’ films), but which is perhaps uncomfortable with the more celebratory address of ‘Loachian’ comedy.

Nonetheless, seen as complementary co-ordinates on the respective trajectories of De Sica’s and Loach’s engagements with neorealism, *Miracle in Milan* and *The Angels’ Share* together illustrate the need for continuing reappraisal of the forms political cinema could or should take. Recalling Paul Willemen’s discussion of the ‘diagnostic understanding’ articulated by political cinema, both films illustrate the possibility for societal engagements voiced not solely through the direct critique of conventional neorealism/naturalism but also obliquely, through the poetic address of myth. In voicing ‘brighter’ sentiments and a celebration of lowered voices while considering their relevance for popular audiences, *Miracle in Milan* and *The Angels’ Share* allow speculation as to the possibilities inherent in voicing ‘the optimism of the will’ in dialectic with ‘the pessimism of the intellect’ (Gramsci 1998; cited in Hill 1998).

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